

**THE LITERARY FIELD IN CALIFORNIA:
A REPORT TO THE JAMES IRVINE FOUNDATION**

Executive Summary

This report was commissioned by The James Irvine Foundation from Poets & Writers, Inc. in September 1998. Our intention was to provide a scan of the nonprofit literary field in California, with an emphasis on literary presenters and writers, but including general information on small literary presses, literary magazines, and distribution as well. All data was compiled in the fall of 1998.

This report is primarily designed for those who are unfamiliar with the range of literary activity in the state; it is not meant to be a comprehensive survey of the literary field in California. For the purposes of this report, the following areas were not covered: education programs, including MFA programs in creative writing; literacy programs; residency programs; reading groups; writing for film, stage and television; and issues related to changes in the publishing industry, including technological advances and the conflict between chain and independent bookstores.

Below is an expanded executive summary of the report. A printed version of the full report will be available later in the fall of 1999. To receive a copy, please contact Prudy Kohler at the James Irvine Foundation in San Francisco.

Karen Clark
Director of California Programs
Poets & Writers, Inc.

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Poets & Writers, Inc. is the largest national service organization for writers. Its mission is to foster the professional development of poets and writers, to promote communication throughout the U.S. literary community, and to help create an environment in which literature can be appreciated by the widest possible public.

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- ***The state of California is home to a large and diverse group of writers, including poets, performance poets, fiction writers, and creative nonfiction writers.***

Our evaluation indicates that California is perceived by the literary community as a place in which new work is welcomed and encouraged. Many opportunities exist for writers to publish their work through local small presses and magazines, but distribution for those magazines and presses is difficult. Writers in California tend to be cut off from the established East Coast publishing networks and there are limited opportunities for financial support through grants or fellowships.

There are over 1,000 literary writers in California who identify themselves as poets, fiction writers, creative nonfiction writers, performance poets, or a combination of the above. Writers are primarily located in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, but many are also located in the Central Valley, Sierra foothills, and on the North Coast. In the 1990 census, 10,508 writers identified themselves as "authors," though that includes those who write textbooks, cookbooks, general nonfiction, etc., as well as literary authors. (However, this does not include technical writers.) PEN Center USA West, a regional organization for writers which is based in Los Angeles, reports that of its 1,351 California members (both active and non) 447 write fiction, 184 write poetry, 351 write research-based nonfiction, 200 write for television or film, 40 translate, 75 write children's literature and 115 write drama. (Many writers chose more than one category.) In order to be accepted as a member, writers must have published a book or had one of their works produced.

In Poets & Writers' databases, we track 1,441 California writers of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. 849 are listed as poets, 284 are listed as fiction/creative nonfiction writers, 21 as performance poets, and 287 listed themselves as practicing more than one genre. These writers are either listed in P&W's *Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers* or have participated in our Readings/Workshops Program.

Most writers in California do not make their living primarily from writing. A small percentage of writers receive fellowships or residencies to support time to write. A small number of California writers get fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (\$20,000, different genres offered every other year) and from the California Arts Council (\$5,000, all literary genres offered every four years). For more established writers, other limited award opportunities exist through foundations and literary awards.

Some writers receive limited income from giving readings or from publishing their work. For readings and other kinds of literary programs, emerging writers are

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paid an average of \$75 to give a reading or \$100 per session to give a workshop. Nationally known writers can command fees of up to \$10,000 per appearance. However, those kinds of fees for readings are rare; the statewide average payment to writers is \$200 per reading.

For publishing their work in literary journals, many writers are paid nothing (except several copies of the journal) or a very small honorarium (between \$10 and \$100). When writers are published by small presses, if they receive any honorarium at all it will usually average between \$500 - \$1,000, and a royalty agreement that may bring in several hundred dollars. Only when they write a commercially viable book and secure a literary agent (if a fiction or nonfiction writer), can a writer earn a larger return from his or her writing.

- ***There are hundreds of literary presenters in the state; however trends indicate that local grassroots presenters and large institutional presenters are faring much better than the mid-size nonprofit literary arts organizations that have historically relied on public funding for support.***

Poets & Writers works with approximately 100 literary presenters a year. In our overall database of 200 presenters, P&W tracks 35 different types of organizations that present literary events. 72% are “traditional” literary presenters, such as libraries, literary centers, and cultural organizations, which are generally those which include literature as part of their mission. These kinds of organizations offer an average of six to ten literary events per year. 28% are “non-traditional” presenters, consisting of groups such as social service organizations, museums, community centers, hospitals, etc. These groups tend to present one or two literary events per year.

Literary presenters are distributed throughout the state. As tracked by those participating in P&W’s Readings/Workshops Program, 46 are in the Los Angeles/Riverside area, 11 in San Diego, 17 on the Central Coast, 31 in the Central Valley, 6 in the San Jose area, 89 in the Bay Area, and 13 in the Sierra and foothills.

Audiences for literary readings and workshops vary by region and type of presenting organization. Festivals (including cowboy poetry) and writers’ conferences tend to have the highest attendance (avg. 150) and most other readings generally draw audiences of 50 to 75 people. Workshops tend to be geared toward 10 to 15 students.

Through interviews and data compiled by Poets & Writers’ programs, it seems that reading and workshop series are in a period of significant change. Large

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institutions such as art museums are taking on reading series and finding large audiences while at the same time small, grassroots efforts to present poetry and fiction in cafes and community centers are flourishing. In the case of the larger institutions, literary programs are doing well because there is adequate staff and marketing resources to develop large audiences. In the case of community based presenters in cafes and local community centers, these events have extremely low overhead; volunteer efforts bring about the events, and writers are often paid out of door receipts.

However, those nonprofit literary presenting organizations that were founded in the 1960s and 1970s—often with the help of public funding—are suffering from a lack of leadership trained in arts administration as well as decreasing available funds for operations, presenting and touring writers. Literary centers in the West, particularly in California, are the type of organization most at risk for collapse, due to reduced funding options and challenges in terms of staffing and resources.

- ***Small presses and literary magazines abound in the state; however, most of them have unpaid staff and experience difficulties with marketing and distribution.***

The small press publishing scene in California is expansive, and covers both rural and urban areas. Between literary magazines, small nonprofit presses, and 'zines, as well as journals on the Internet, writers are able to find an outlet for their work. However, many of these ventures are self-financed due to lack of other available funding, and as that funding which did support such activities diminishes, magazines and presses are finding it harder to pay for escalating printing and distribution costs, let alone to pay writers.

According to Dustbooks' *1998-99 International Directory of Little Magazines and Small Presses*, the *1998 Poets' Market*, and the *1998 Council of Literary Magazines and Presses Directory*, more than 100 literary magazines are published in the state of California. Most of California's literary magazines are based in the Los Angeles Basin and in the Bay Area; however, there are a number in the Central Valley, along the Central Coast, and in the Sierra and North Coast as well. The Bay Area is home to the largest number of literary magazines, perhaps due to Small Press Distribution's headquarters in Berkeley and an active writing and book arts community.

Likewise, over 100 small literary presses exist in California. Most of these presses were founded in the 1970s and 1980s, when public funding for such ventures was more available. The majority of presses is located in the Bay Area, perhaps again due to the large literary and book arts communities. There are

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surprisingly few in the Central Valley, given the number of writers and presenters there. However, the presses that exist in that area may not be registered with these directories and may be distributed only locally.

Most literary small presses only publish a few titles a year, with small print runs between 250 and 1,000 copies. Because the distribution of these books can be so difficult, publishers cannot initially take a risk on larger print runs unless the book becomes successful.

Distribution is one of the most essential issues in literary publishing today. A publisher can create an impressive list of titles and produce well-designed books, but if there is not an effective distribution system for those books, both the writer and the publisher suffer. California is home to several national wholesalers and distributors who are responsible for getting the books into the marketplace. A wholesaler will take on individual titles of a press, sometimes do some marketing of their titles, and sell those books to bookstores, libraries and, in one case, individuals. A distributor will only take on a press as a whole (and usually exclusively), do more comprehensive marketing of their presses' titles, and also sell to bookstores, libraries, etc. There is only one wholesaler remaining in the country that exclusively sells literary books: Small Press Distribution, based in Berkeley, works with approximately 180 literary presses and magazines in California.

Like literary presenters, many presses and magazines rely on local methods of distribution and support. Resources, both financial and human, are in great need; many editors remain unpaid. Many presses do not have access to resources that could improve their marketing, and thus increase their earned income.

- ***Fewer California literary organizations, particularly presenters, have received national grants, either from the National Endowment for the Arts or private foundations, over the last three years.***

In studying funding trends over the last ten years, it seems that California literary organizations are less competitive in the national grant process than several years ago. At both the National Endowment for the Arts and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, fewer California organizations are being selected in the grant process. In some cases that is due to the fact that fewer organizations are applying, due to staff turnover or a perception that they will not be eligible. Recent changes in funding at the Lannan Foundation are also directly affecting California organizations.

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Since the discipline changes at the NEA, literary groups in California have continued to receive funding; however, it seems that fewer organizations are applying, especially literary service and presenting organizations. From a high of \$354,830 in FY 95, California literary organizations received \$185,500 in FY 99. Also, the California Arts Council provides grants to a range of literary organizations, but they are often not enough to support a staff position or general operations. In FY 99, the CAC made 22 grants to literary organizations in the Organizational Support Program for a total of \$119,347. As a comparison, the New York State Council on the Arts provided \$940,612 to 136 literary organizations in FY 99.

In the two most recent rounds of grants given by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, in literary publishing and through the Audiences for Literature Network, no organizations were chosen from California.

The Lannan Foundation has also been a significant source of support for the California literary community. Through major grants to Poets & Writers and California Poets in the Schools, in 1998-99 Lannan indirectly provided over \$60,000 in support to writers teaching and reading in California sites. During 1998-99 Lannan also provided \$50,000 in support to Small Press Distribution and \$10,000 to *Poetry Flash*. In addition to smaller grants made to some presenters and publishers, Lannan was an important and sympathetic funder that seemed to understand the needs of literary organizations. Unfortunately, all of their funding has been suspended for one year in 1999 as they undergo an internal evaluation. It is unclear whether Lannan will return to funding audience development oriented programs in the future or whether their grants may be more directed towards established writers.

- ***More foundations could include literature in their guidelines, so that more funding and resources would become available in order to help stabilize nonprofit literary arts organizations in California.***

Research indicates that as California literary organizations receive less from public and private funding sources on a national level than their counterparts in the Midwest and the East, there are a limited number of national or West Coast foundations that will even consider proposals from literary organizations.

In December 1998, the Foundation Center released a study on arts grants making¹. Among the categories listed, literature was not listed as a separate arts discipline. Rather it was listed as a sub-group of "arts-related humanities," which only received 4% of the total funds granted to arts groups. In 1996 the national

¹ See *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, December 17, 1998.

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total appropriated to literature by foundations was \$7,962,496, or 0.9% of total dollars funded (144 grants, which was 1.3% for number of grants awarded) as compared to performing arts at 33%, (4,748 grants) and museum activities at 30% (2,438 grants). Although visual arts is listed at 3%, artists are also supported through museums. Other categories, such as multi-disciplinary arts, may include literary aspects to their programming, but overall the amount of private funding available for literary organizations is extremely limited.

It is hoped that in future years this trend may change. Given the number of foundations that support the visual and performing arts, perhaps in the future more foundations will appreciate the value and importance of the literary arts in our culture by expanding their guidelines.

- ***The California literary field is filled with talent and an endless array of interesting writing, magazines, books and programs; the challenge in the coming years is how to stabilize the field so that these become more known (and supported) on a national level.***

The strength of the literary field in California is that it includes an incredible diversity of organizations, from small presses, to literary magazines, to presenters at literary centers, museums, and community centers. Some of the most interesting writing in the country—especially from experimental and Pacific Rim writers—is being done in California. California literary organizations survive amidst challenges and generally limited resources, continuing to exist even in a difficult climate for arts organizations. Writers continue to migrate here from other areas of the country. In short, there is no shortage of a supply of good work, either from writers, publishers, or presenters. The challenge comes in developing larger and more diverse audiences for the work being created and increasing accessibility to literary books, magazines, and literary programs.

Although California can boast of a large number of organizations, many of those organizations are weakened by a lack of infrastructure. The majority of the more developed literary organizations were founded in the 1970s and 1980s, when there was more public funding to foster new organizations. As public and private funding has declined, many organizations have scaled back considerably, and have had to make choices such as whether or not to merge with a university, or to have only part-time staff. The lack of resources—both financial and administrative—cause these organizations to have a large turnover in staff. Those that don't have a turnover in staff often depend on free labor; for example, most literary magazine editors in California are unpaid. Over the last five years, this has weakened the field overall in California, as many now working in literary organizations come from an artistic background with little arts administration

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experience, and are often paid little or no money to do the work they do. Over time this has in turn weakened the organizations, in both staff and board structure.

On a national level, the California literary community seems less connected to overall developments in literature. Because the literary field does not have a single service organization but rather several which serve various parts of the field (e.g. small presses, and magazines, writers, or translators), organizations had relied on the NEA for a degree of leadership. Since the demise of a discipline-specific NEA, literary organizations in California have not had a national source to turn to for guidance and financial support. The programs within the Literature Program—Audience Development, Literary Publishing, Individual Fellowships, and Professional Development—all supported California organizations at fairly high levels.

In terms of opportunities, although California literary organizations face the challenge of continuing into the next century, they also are blessed by having a strong sense of community among themselves, particularly in the Bay Area. California is home to two of the largest book-buying markets in the country, Los Angeles and San Francisco, which host book festivals that together draw upwards of 125,000 people each year. The presence of Silicon Valley and its enormous resources presents an opportunity which literary organizations have not yet developed; however, without some assistance and leadership in the field it will be a challenge.

Unfortunately, although the opportunities exist, they are remote. Many of the organizations that are in a tenuous state due to financial difficulty are also suffering in terms of human resources. The content of the work is often excellent—the question becomes how to market it to new audiences, especially when many of the skilled individuals involved in promoting new work are approaching 50, may be unpaid for this work and need to hold other jobs, and may not have health insurance. Because there are few financial incentives, younger people cannot afford to take on apprenticeships, and those graduating from MFA programs are more inclined to look for teaching positions rather than arts administration positions.

California's population is changing, and given the influx of immigrants each year, the literary field is in a position to be an arts discipline that can bridge the gap between different cultures, through translation of the written and spoken word. In 1997, California's population was 52% white, 29% Latino/Hispanic, 11% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Black, and 1% Native American. During 1996-97, the Latino population increased from 26 to 29 percent, and the Asia/Pacific Islander

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population increased from 9 to 11%. There is a great deal of potential to work with these communities through literature, but if presenters and publishers are in a weakened state, it will be much more difficult to accomplish.

California literary organizations and writers are imbued with a sense of innovation, of breaking boundaries, of looking West as well as East. Nonprofit literary arts organizations help to nurture and publicize that work, through public or written presentation. The challenge for both writers and organizations is how to highlight the importance of that work in our culture, so that more individuals and foundations support and nurture it beyond the millennium.